An Infinity of Angels

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by
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The First Appearance:

The way it all began, Herbie Bloom was taking the short cut home across the overrun little field in the center of the town of Hopesville, Pennsylvania. The field was lumpy and overgrown with weeds and stunty little trees, and there was an irrigation ditch along one side filled with stagnant water.

There was some question as to who owned this field. Old Mrs. Succher had a deed that went back to 1889. It gave her clear title. On the other hand, no property taxes had been paid on this land for almost fifty years. That gave the town council of Hopesville the right to condemn it, appropriate it, and pay Mrs. Succher a fair market price for her property.

But the problem was not just Mrs. Succher's rights. There were several other claimants to the property, old people living in Michigan and California who had papers to prove their claims. These papers looked bogus on the face of it. But they had not yet been proven bogus.

Until the rightful owner of the property had been ascertained, nothing could be done. There wasn't even a fund to provide the town government with money to make the tests that would prove or disprove the various claims. In fact, for the town to disprove the claims might cost more than the worth of the property itself.

And there was also the claim by the Lehigh and Hudson railroad, which had a paper claiming that Mrs. Succher's grandfather Antonio, had granted the railroad a right of way across the property, and had also assigned the mineral rights, if any, along with the easement.

The railroad claim looked even more bogus than the others, but it could not be ignored, since the railroad owners were litigous in t he extreme, and not in the habit of letting go of anything they had any sort of a claim to. That was why the field had not yet been paved over to allow Sycen Builders to put up a shopping mall.

This field had been chosen for the first test case of the current period. Its ambiguous status as to ownership was certainly a factor in the selection. Herbie Bloom might himself have been a factor, though there's no proof as to this.

A simple meeting of man and angel, one on one, no hysterical crowds around. That would come later, when Mrs. Succher put up an unauthorized stand on her field, with a sign proclaiming it the first place of the angel visitation in the current period, with suitable souvenirs of the occasion for sale. These souvenirs were little rag angels, made by Mrs. Succher's three nieces, and sold for a dollar each: Mrs. Succher was no gouger.

(Later, after she died, the field and the stand were sold by her heirs to Angel Enterprises, Inc., who sought to commercialize the holdings. They even went so far as to try to get a signed statement from the original angel that this was the place where he had first appeared. But angels had no sense of commerce and nothing ever came of it.)

So Herbie was walking across the field one fine June morning, on his way from Mrs. Succher's house, where he rented a room, to the Hopesville gymnasium, where he ran the concession that rented out track shoes and other gym equipment, and sold Gatorade and Power Bars. Cutting across the field saved him almost half a mile, and, except for the ragweed, made it a pleasant stroll most days.

Today was not most days, however. As he walked his usual route, Herbie noticed a figure reclining on the little knoll in the middle of the property. The figure was dressed in light-colored clothing and seemed to have something white on its back.

Herbie strolled over, thinking this might be a person in distress. He was a good person, this Herbie. You can be sure the angel study council had ascertained this in advance.

As he approached, Herbie saw that it appeared to be a youngish man. And this youngish man had a pair of large white wings either attached to or growing out of his back.

"Are you all right?" Herbie asked.

"Never better," the man said. He stood up. Herbie saw now that the wings were taller than the man himself, extending up to his ears, and downward to brush the ground.

"How are you?"

"I'm fine," Herbie said. "Are you sure you're not in trouble of any sort?"

"No, no," the man said. "I was just passing through and this looked like a nice place to lie down so I lay down."

"It is a nice place," Herbie said. "I sometimes come here myself on my day off. There's a park in town, also, but it's too--manicured, if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean," the man said. "This looked like a better place to take a nap and then a sip of nectar." Herbie noticed only then that the man was holding a small golden bottle.

"Yeah, it's a good place for a drink of nectar," Herbie said. "Well, if you're OK, I'll be getting along. Mustn't be late for work, you know."

He started to walk on. He had taken no more than a few steps when the man said, "By the way..."

"Yes?" said Herbie, stopping and turning.

"Did you happen to notice my wings?"

"As a matter of fact, I did," Herbie said. "But I didn't want to

mention it. In case--well, in case they were an embarrassment to you."

"Thoughtful of you. But why should they be an embarrassment to me?"

"I saw on a tv show the other night how some people are born or develop extra body parts, like an extra arm or leg, and I thought you might be one of those. I thought you might be sensitive about it."

"No. I'm not. Where I come from, wings are perfectly normal."

"Oh... Where do you come from, if I'm not out of line asking."

"Not at all. I come from heaven."

"Heaven? Is that a city in California?"

"If it is, it's not the one I'm referring to. I'm taking about--" He gestured upward, and his wingtips twitched. "The heaven up there."

"If you're from heaven and drink nectar and have wings, then you must be an angel."

"You've got it," the angel said. "I didn't want to just blurt it out. I thought you'd catch on to it."

"It took me a little while," Herbie admitted. "Angelic appearances are unusual... Would it be prying for me to ask what you're doing here? I mean, why did you come to Hopesville, and why did you appear to me?"

"I had to begin somewhere," the angel said. "Now that you've seen me, you can begin to spread the word."

"Oh, no," Herbie said. "I'm not going to tell anyone."

"Why not?"

"Do you want people to think I'm crazy?"

"There's that," the angel admitted. "But don't you have the courage of your convictions?"

"I don't have any convictions," Herbie said. "Unless... You wouldn't happen to be a Jewish angel, would you?" The angel shook his head. "Non-sectarian."

"This God you represent... I don't suppose he's a Jewish God?"

"God, too, is non-sectarian. But He has His likes and dislikes, like all of us."

"What are you trying to say to me?" Herbie asked.

"I'm just pointing out that God is not likely to like people who won't help his angels."

"Is this a threat?"

"Not at all. Neither God nor one of his representatives, of which I happen to be one, would ever threaten a person. But on the other hand, if you ever need a favor...well, in that case you should ask yourself, what have I ever done for God before asking him to do something for me."

"I see your point," Herbie said.

"And what do you think?"

"I think it's tough being the only Jew in a small American town. Why didn't you pick on somebody else?"

"I'm not picking on you," the angel said. "I'm offering you a rare and wonderful opportunity."

"To be stoned by the goyim?"

"To be our prophet. And also, to be our liason man at the United Nations, once we get our accreditation." Herbie stared at him. "You think they'll let you guys into the United Nations?"

"Why not? We represent a real territory. Or is heaven not a real place by you?"

Herbie considered. "What sort of work is liason?"

"You'll talk to the newspapers on our behalf. At a very good salary. It's better than renting out gym shoes."

"So you know about that?"

"I did my research before I came here."

"This town is full of crazy Christian sects," Herbie said. "They'll tear me apart when I tell them about this."

"Not at all. I predict they'll be very interested and come out here to see for themselves."

"And then?"

"Then I'll do the miracle thing and we'll have some followers."

"Which miracle thing were you considering?"

"The water into wine bit."

"For these people, water into beer might go down better. Especially if you can add a shot of Southern Comfort on the side."

"That's good advice, Herbie. We're going to pay you as an advisor, too. These little local touches are invaluable. Now please go into town and get on with it."

"If they happen to burn me at the stake, remember, you owe me a favor."

On the Sex of Angels

Angels are commonly referred to as 'he' or 'she.' There is a tradition that angels are sexless, as well as a tradition that says that this tradition is nonsense. We can say, from our observations, that angels appear to be men or women with wings and (frequently) the dopey expression that sometimes accompanies extreme goodness, or its near-cousin, naivete. There are angels of all skin and hair colors, from albino blonde to purple-black ebony. There are baby angels, sometimes (inaccurately) called cherubim.

No one has ever seen an angel naked, so science has been unable to ascertain the average size and shape of their sexual organs, if any. X-ray equipment has been tried, but for some reason doesn't seem to penetrate the thin, light cloth the angels are typically clothed in. Nor has it been possible yet to obtain samples of this cloth to test their

radiation-blocking ability, if any. Several companies have shown interest in manufacturing 'angel cloth,' but their inquiries have not been answered.

The ubiquity of angels.

One day there was one, the one who came to Herbie, and the day after there were many, and within a year there was an angelic embassy, and shortly after that, a seat in the General Assembly of the United Nations, this due to the efforts of then-President Cartwright, who thought he recognized in the angels the fulfillent of youthful visions of his Mormon childhood.

Scientific Proof of the existence of Angels.

The great religion of America and most of the Western world was science, and so the first order of business was to prove or disprove whether or not these beings who represented themselves as angels were indeed and in fact angels, and if so, what constituted an angel, what were his properties, and how did he differ from a human being.

Finally, if these beings who represented themselves as angels were indeed angels, did this prove or at least imply the existence of heaven, of God?

The scientists were hampered because no angel ever let him or herself be examined, to have samples of flesh and blood taken, to submit to the various scientific procedures that might ascertain their reality.

The angels were not purposely mysterious. They just wanted to go about their business like everyone else. Herbie was their appointed spokesman. If you have any questions, ask Herbie. But Herbie didn't know anything. After that firdst day, the angels never told him anything, never answered his questions, never gave him any orders, never made any requests. This was fine with Herbie, who wasn't very interested in scientific proofs of angelhood.

Angels and wings. Angels on Earth--those we have observed--make great use of their wings. Some would say entirely too much use of them. Angels don't walk up or down stairs when they can fly.

They tend to avoid elevators, escalators, and staircases.

Many of us have seen them on shopping trips, flying in the golden perfumed air of New York's great stores, like Saks 5th Avenue, Bergdorf Goodman's, and above all, Bloomingdale's.

Sometimes the air of these places seems dense with angels, especially at the time of January sales, and you wonder how they can avoid collisions. But avoid them they do.

No angel has ever been seen crashing into another, or tangling wings and coming to the ground with a despairing flutter.

Angels seem to have built-in radar. (Although they have never allowed us to examine them to see if this is indeed the case.)

In tighter spaces, like private homes and shops and offices, angels seem to move more like moths than birds. You can pack a lot of moths into a room and they never collide.

An angel's flight in crowded territory consists of fluttering and darting and hovering, like a moth or butterly.

How can angels fly?

You would suspect that an angel keeps himself aloft by strong muscular motions of the wings. They do indeed beat their wings when they fly, but, according to science, with insufficient force to allow them to stay aloft.

Scientists have proven that given the average wingspan of an angel, (as observed but not actually measured) and taking into account the apparent musculature of the average angel, an angel could not provide enough force to keep itself afloat, much less make any forward progress. As the scientists said in their report, "The wingspan is not large enough and the musculature not bulky enough to provide the necessary impetus for flight."

Angels don't comment on these matters. Herbie once remarked, "True... but nevertheless they do fly."

When asked if this was a miracle, they have been known to report (through Herbie) "What isn't?" To which there is of course no reply.

Angels and the hereafter

Many of us thought that once we had angels among us, all our questions concerning the hereafter would be answered.

This has not proven to be the case. We don't even know for certain if there is a heaven and a life after death.

We have only Herbie's conjectures, and these have been shown to be not worth squat.

In fact, their veritable presence, and their silence, has raised more questions, and provided no answers.

Angels and business

Soon after their election to the United Nations as the representatives of heaven, it was observed that many angels were branching out into small businesses.

Angels, with their particular talents, were natural to go into the delivery business, and the messenger business.

People could get used to the idea of angels delivering flowers. That seemed natural. But pizzas?

They went in for heavier deliveries, too. Ten or twelve angels could lift and carry an automobile, and put it where you wanted it, even if that was thousands of miles away.

Angels didn't mind crossing oceans and continents carrying heavy loads.

Herbie claimed they enjoyed the exercise, but he might have been making that up.

It was only a step from pizzas and automobiles to personal carrying services. You got used to the sight of humans in light-weight palanquins, carried aloft from their Wall street offices to their upstate residences.

But it was not only the wealthy who could afford these services. The wealthy were the pace-setters. But the angels, operating on some weird economic law of their own devising, apparently, made the prices of even their most personal and exotic services available to all, at prices anyone could afford.

One thing the popularity of their services did--it brought about an increase in the number of angels on Earth, supply of angels apparently following the demand for angel services in classical fashion.

Airlines hired angels to ride on their wingtips and warn of impending danger. Having an angel on your plane was better than radar.

Angels and extraterritoriality

In the first flood of enthusiasm, some countries made special concessions to the angels. The Vatican granted them a small portion of church owned property outside of Rome to use as they pleased, according to their own rules, granting them complete self-rule.

This was at a time when the new Pope, in a burst of perhaps naive enthusiasm, believed the living presence of angels was proof of the doctrines of his church, a belief that Herbie ridiculed from the beginning, and than none of the other Christian sects, or the Jewish and Moslem sects, for that matter, ever believed.

But in the early years, a number of religions fell into the Pope's error. The angels never claimed affiliation with any single group, though they never repudiated the possibility. They never claimed that any group had special access to heaven.

They never claimed that those without religion had no place in heaven.

Angels and love

Inevitably, there were people who fell in love with angels.

There is no evidence that this love was ever reciprocated.

Angels kept to themselves. The idea of mating and marrying with one particular human seemed to them amusing, but not to be considered as a possibility. Or at least that's what Herbie said.

Angels and money

But what did angels need with money? "It's of no use in heaven," Herbie admitted on their behalf. "But on Earth it can be useful."

They used it, apparently, to 'be like everyone else,' as Herbie said. And to buy the sorts of organic fruit and vegetables that seemed to constitute their entire diet.

One night around sunset I saw an angel flapping slowly across the swollen setting sun. He was singing something, a song without words, hardly even a melody, more a lament.

He looked so sad, flaping his way across the setting sun, sort of potbellied and clumsy, not like the bright clean-limbed young angels we'd been seeing, and I suddenly realized that angels age too, and this ageing of angels was a kind of curtain call.

When the angels are no more, it is the end of all of us.

It doesn't matter if there's a heaven or not. The question, the only question is, is there an Earth?

END